

# REVIEWS

## Atom Egoyan's **Next Of Kin**

Seldom do you find a low-budget film – never mind a first feature – as technically accomplished as *Next of Kin*, produced, written, directed and edited by 24-year-old Toronto independent filmmaker Atom Egoyan. The narrative is engaging and crisply paced, the dialogue sure and authentic, the performances solid, the locations, sets, and small details appropriate. Then there is the camera – a camera which not only moves, but moves swiftly, fluidly, assuredly. It adds up to quite an achievement for a \$37,000 film made on Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants (it looks like it should have cost \$100,000). Egoyan must share the credit with cinematographer Peter Mettler (director of the praised 1982 experimental feature *Sciserre*) and a dedicated crew of young Toronto film professionals.

A cultural comedy with disturbing undertones, *Next of Kin* premiered at the Festivals of Festivals and was Canada's sole entry in October at the Mannheim Film Festival in West Germany. Egoyan's background is in theatre (he has written 10 plays, including one to be produced in New York this fall, *External Affairs*) and, to a lesser extent, film criticism (while at University of Toronto, he wrote some of the most lucid and intelligent reviews ever to appear in the student press), so, not surprisingly, his films reveal formal considerations.

His previous film, *Open House*, a half-hour drama which aired on CBC-TV, was like *Next of Kin* a deliberately self-conscious study of a family in crisis, but Egoyan's distance from the material was too pronounced: you felt you were witnessing an exploration in film form rather than a movie with characters, story and action. In this respect, Egoyan has made great progress with his first feature: *Next of Kin* is a warmer, livelier, more engaging film.

Egoyan begins *Next of Kin* in the middle of its story, structuring the first 20 minutes so that the narrative both catches up and works backward, creating a haunting, effective exposition. It establishes the surreal aspect of its story. Peter (Patrick Tierney), a 23-year-old, upper-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, lives at home with his quarrelling parents. He is unhappy, disaffected, aimless, spending his days "pretending" (i.e., daydreaming), which infuriates his staunchly conservative parents. Though the film never explicitly states it, Peter's problem is that he does not want to be a WASP.

The family is undergoing psychotherapy – the sessions are videotaped so patients can review them later – and one day Peter looks instead at the tape of an Armenian family, the Deryans, guilty over having given up their infant son Bedros 20 years earlier when they were poor. The father George (Berge Fazlian) takes his frustration out on his daughter Ajah (Arsinee Khanjian) while the mother (Sirvart Fazlian) suffers silently. Since Bedros would now be his own age, Peter decides to impersonate him: he seeks both to ease the family's pain

and rid himself of his own unwanted identity.

For Peter, the project is his first venture out of the home and the ultimate test of his "pretending" skills. The Deryans immediately accept him as their son. It doesn't matter that he doesn't look Armenian: all their lives they have fantasized a role their son would have played in the family, so when one arrives they don't ask questions. Playing it straight, Egoyan works this family's lavish affections toward their improbable son Peter – for whom the epithet "Whitebread" surely applies – for much deadpan humour.

Soon Peter faces a choice between his hollow WASP existence and the rich emotional life of this strange ethnic family. It sounds like a cliché, and would be a terrible cliché were it not for Egoyan's persistent undercutting of the narrative. A nightmare lurks at the edges of Peter's adolescent dream of choosing his own family, giving *Next of Kin* a quirky, unsettling feel: wholesome family drama played out in the Twilight Zone. In one scene, Peter curls up on the kitchen table so the mother can cuddle him as she did the infant Bedros; it's funny but disturbing – especially since it's the same table upon which they consumed Peter's homecoming meal. Add to this the film's roving, probing camera style, said by the director to represent the spirit of the missing son. Through this device, the film subconsciously contrasts its visual style with the family's deadening need to fix Peter/Bedros in its own image of a son – an image which remains largely infantile (they have even preserved Bedros' teddy bear).

In the ensuing contest of wills, the family easily overwhelms the hapless Peter. He finally loses control of his escapade when the Deryans throw Bedros a surprise birthday party. With the family's relatives gathered to pass judgment, Peter is presented for approval then led to the cake, where his sister beckons him to look closer, closer, until a pair of hands pop out to grab his face. They are George's hands – it's only another of the practical jokes the Deryans enjoy playing – but it signifies how completely and hopelessly Peter has plunged into alien territory.

Working the narrative against expectation, Egoyan never gives the audience the big discovery scene it anticipates.

Instead, Peter remains as Bedros, achieving his dream of family bliss at the cost of destroying himself. As he lies in bed surrounded by his new family, dread mixes with satisfaction: Peter realizes he is among strangers, strangers who love Bedros, not Peter. As his sister places his photographs into the family album during the final credits, the grotesqueness of his fate is underlined: the roving camera has represented the spirit of the real Bedros, while Peter's frozen image suggests his soul's imprisonment. The last laugh; chillingly, is on him.

Part of the story's charm is that Peter's ruse is never revealed, but this limits the film's overall scope. The ambiguous ending sidesteps Peter's identity problem, and many issues set up by the film hardly get touched – questions of culture, class differences, the gap between "real" and "pretend." Given the film's high level of accomplishment, one wishes Egoyan had pushed his material further; one senses many of these issues remain unresolved for him, to be explored in later works. Perhaps it's that the film's intellectual premise demands Peter be something of a cipher, but Patrick Tierney's performance makes him a more sympathetic character, so you want to know more than the film is prepared to tell you about his life, his relation to his parents (who are only broadly sketched caricatures), his emotions. Nevertheless, its ironic texture, visual style and feel for genuine cinematic exploration make *Next of Kin* a promising debut and should establish Egoyan as a young Canadian director worth watching – and supporting – in the coming years.

Bruce Malloch ●

**NEXT OF KIN** d./sc./ed. Atom Egoyan  
d.o.p. Peter Mettler sd. rec. Clark McCarron art d.  
Ross Nichol p. man. Camelia Frieberg, Jeremy  
Podeswa a.d. Mark R. Battley gaffer Bill Brown  
cont. Susan Haller grip Imre Geiszt best boy  
Frank Foster boom Paul McGlashan ward. Delanie  
Prasek asst. cam. Doug Koch sp. efx. ed. Michele  
Moses mus. ed. Gordon Kidd asst. ed. Bruce  
McDonald titled Metamedia stills Tim O'Brien,  
Kaloust Babian p. assts. Hagop Apkarian, David  
Churchill, Jim Coburn, Paul Harris, Vivian Palin,  
Pierre Yereimian class. guitar Atom Egoyan sd.  
efx. David Rokeby. Traditional folk music by The  
Song and Dance Ensemble of Armenia. Produced  
with the assistance of The Canada Council and  
Ontario Arts Council p.c. Ego Film Arts, Toronto  
colour 16mm running time 72 minutes, l.p.  
Patrick Tierney, Berge Fazlian, Arsinee Khanjian,  
Sirvart Fazlian.

● Patrick Tierney and 'family' in *Next of Kin*: wholesome drama in the Twilight Zone



## Allan Eastman's **Danger Bay**

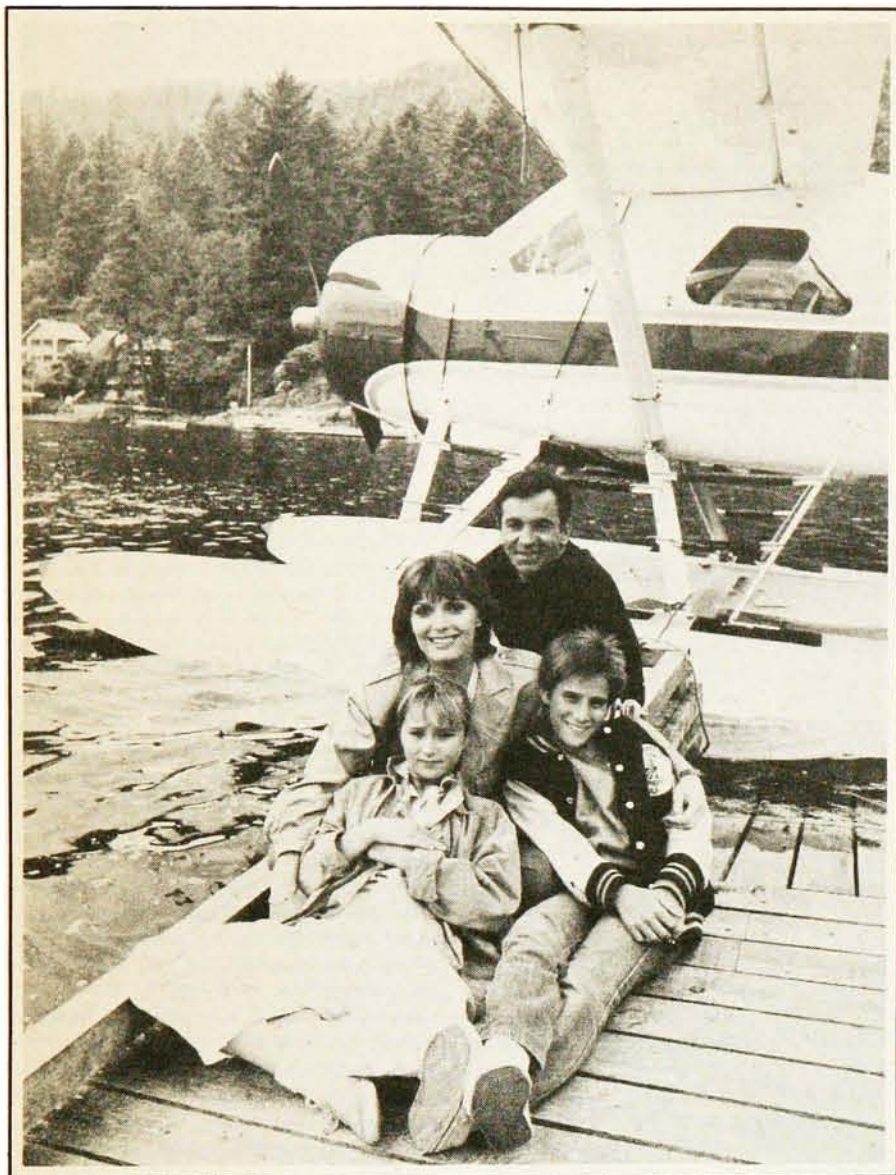
A scene from *Danger Bay*, the new half-hour drama series coproduced by Toronto independent Paul Saltzman, CBC-TV, and the Disney Channel: deep in the British Columbia interior the Bad Guy aims his rifle at the Good Guy, valiant veterinarian Dr. Grant "Doc" Roberts (Donnelly Rhodes). The good doctor escapes, though, in a helicopter piloted by the capable and lovely Joyce Carter (Deborah Wakeham), who unthinks the villain with a blast from her craft's propellers. The Bad Guy aims at his fleeing partners but they get away, too. Disgusted, he flings his rifle to the ground without firing a single shot. It's odd. Guns on TV are as familiar as the medium itself, but a TV gun that doesn't go off is rare – which says the makers of *Danger Bay* are up to something different.

*Danger Bay* builds its stories around real-life environmental concerns, not cops-and-robbers fantasies. Each episode tries to teach the audience some unusual facts, like the origin of the expression "Mad as a hatter." The show scrupulously avoids excessive violence, sexism, racism, and exploitation, creating its own benign unreality where guns are aimed but never fired. Using the medium's established conventions, it seeks to give disenchanted TV viewers a show which is not only good but good for them.

The question remains: can a show like *Danger Bay* improve television merely by changing the content? Much of the show's format is as conventional as any TV half-hour. The same plotlines structured around three commercial breaks – a sameness ameliorated somewhat by the uncommon flair of Doug McKay's location cinematography. Same combination of terrific job and wonderful family for Doc Roberts, whose kids (Christopher Crabb and Ocean Hellman) are as cute and likeable as any TV siblings. Same loyal supporting cast – along with Carter, there's a bright, efficient and pretty researcher (Michelle Chan) to explain the scientific stuff and an adorable seal pup, Danger. Same synth-pop score pulsing as relentlessly as any action thriller's, as if it alone were charged with putting the danger in *Danger Bay*.

Then there are the show's progressive elements. Doc's an environmental protector and crusader against injustice to man or beast. Show this public servant a wrong and he'll set it right, hang the risk, cost or paperwork. He'll also doing his best as a single father. His kids share the household chores. Joyce holds a traditionally male job. Chan's researcher is Chinese. There are welcome alternatives to the stereotyped blandness of the TV family, and if *Danger Bay* is to make a dent on public consciousness it will be through the dynamic it creates among these characters, the little daily things they do which speak of a larger context. As it stands after two episodes, the show could probably push these elements further. Doc handles only small change like rabid dogs and miscreant prospectors and still gives most of the orders.





● **Danger Bay** stars kids Ocean Hellman, Chris Crabb, and leads Wakeham and Rhodes

Mom's absence isn't really explained, Joyce's relationship to Doc is largely undefined and the researcher's role limited to the lab. Both kids may cook, but the boy makes peanut-butter omelettes while the girl prepares dinner for company.

*Danger Bay* also must integrate its social concerns with the requirements of good drama, something it doesn't do in director Allan Eastman's first episode. The story seems more science lesson than drama, the characters never really come alive, and the music annoyingly covers what seems like 95 percent of the show. Gil Shilton's second episode works much better, which may mean *Danger Bay* will improve each time out. The story has conflict and tension, so the educational aspect is submerged — where it belongs. Joyce and Doc banter back and forth, the kids come in at the top and end for comic relief, and the music is less prominent. It's a solid, well-crafted TV half-hour.

It's hard to establish *Danger Bay's* true political line. Despite its left-leaning aspect, it also bears an unquestioning reverence and trust in advanced technology. No birch-bark and pinecone backwoods nature show, *Danger Bay* sets Doc Roberts in command of an impressive technological array — which of course he uses only for good. In episode one technology rescues Doc's daughter from rabies. An improved vaccine not only saves her life but greatly reduces her treatment, while sophisticated telecommunications and transportation systems deliver it to Vancouver overnight. In episode two Doc's medical knowledge and the lab's findings uncover the real reason grizzlies

are attacking campers. While the forest rangers would simply shoot the bears each time, Doc's probing intelligence — an intelligence patterned on, developed and assisted by technology — works out the entire picture. There's nothing false about this, and an intelligent TV hero is refreshing, but let's hope the whole series does not ignore the various ills modern technology has also produced.

There doesn't seem to be any reason to be cynical about *Danger Bay*. Its makers seem sincere and committed in their attempt to create a genuine alternative to current TV fare. Unfortunately, these good intentions may not help their scramble for viewers and survival. To succeed, *Danger Bay* must consolidate its present strengths and take more risks, while audiences must be patient and accept that early victories will be small.

Above all, the show must avoid becoming merely a TV form of diet cola — same product, except no bad sugar, no bad caffeine, no bad calories and no bad fun. Such an approach appeals immediately to a certain mentality. But in the long run, compared to the guilty, irresistible pleasures of the original, how many will continue to bother?

**Bruce Malloch ●**

**DANGER BAY** d. Allan Eastman, Gil Shilton, Michael Berry **exec. p.** Paul Saltzman **creators** Saltzman & Peter Dixon **exec. story cons.** John Duggan **p.** Mary Eilts **post-p.** Paul Quigley **l.p.** Donnelly Rhodes, Ocean Hellman, Chris Crabb, Deborah Wakeham, Kyle Skinner, Hagen Beggs, Michele Chan, Tom Heaton, Roy Vickers. *A more complete crew list was unavailable from CBC for this issue.*

*A more complete crew list was unavailable from CBC for this issue.*

Jean Beaudry  
& François Bouvier's

## Jacques et Novembre

Is it surely no accident that this extraordinary first feature has already been selected as one of 15 by young directors from around the world for the Tokyo International Film Festival next summer. For the sensibility that informs *Jacques et Novembre* — by its acceptance — and celebration — of the fleetingness of life — is profoundly Japanese in spirit.

If in every other sense, *Jacques et Novembre* is Canadian, (or rather a Montreal film) this is simply because it is a film in the purest sense: a perfect balance between the universality of its theme and the specificity of its location. For *Jacques et Novembre* addresses a topic that concerns all human beings, namely death.

Jacques, in a performance of stunning simplicity by Jean Beaudry, is 31 years-old and dying of an unspecified disease. It is November, which will be his last month. The film is a diary of Jacques' farewell to life, or more accurately, three films: the film itself, and within it, the film that Jacques' friend, Denis (Pierre Rousseau), is making with him about Jacques' ultimate month, intercut with a video diary that Jacques keeps when he is alone. Beautifully constructed — the editing is also by Beaudry — the film plays totally effectively on all levels, cutting effortlessly from film, to video, to stills, and pushing each level of medium to its fullest expressive capability, conscious all the while of the evanescence of its subject.

*Jacques et Novembre* displays remarkable control over all its elements; not once does it falter; not once does it slip into sentimentality. Above all, it is a film permeated with respect for filmmaking, and for its subjects; and when one considers furthermore that it was made for \$15,000 in costs, the achievement of these young filmmakers is simply miraculous.

*Jacques et Novembre* was originally conceived as a documentary film on the last weeks of a 24-year-old cousin of Bouvier's, stricken by leukemia. The rapidity of the boy's death, sadly, outpaced the filmmakers. However, the impact of what Bouvier terms "this extraordinary death" left a searing imprint on the project that explains the (as yet unpaid) devotion to the film of all concerned with the production as well as the uncompromising nature of the filmmakers' approach. *Jacques et Novembre* stares death in the face, yet does not flinch.

But it is not in any sense a morbid film. As its varied literary references (a Jacques Brel song, a line from Marquez's "100 Years of Solitude") make clear, it simply accepts — as we must all accept — that dying is a part of life. The courage of this film is in its belief that this realization is something all human beings can share in.

Jacques is thus Everyman and as such embodies what is both mortal and eternal in man — a very powerful video scene of Beaudry's emaciated body against a wall of light and shadow unmistakably states the "Ecce homo" theme. But Jacques is also more than a

symbol: he is the particular, specific individual having to come to terms with his own finitude in the context of life that will continue without him. This saying goodbye to life is brilliantly handled with both sadness and humor in all its heart-rending fullness: his reconciliation with a distant, hard-working father; his ex-girlfriend who is pregnant with another man's child; his tiresome relatives with whom he no longer has time to pretend; the sale of all his worldly possessions to raise money for the film-within-the-film.

In one hilarious scene, Jacques, calculator in hand, is adding up a balance-sheet of what his life has amounted to. Totalling the years spent eating, sleeping, reading and watching television produces an unaccounted-for time-gap. Then he remembers sex. He carefully quantifies his sexual experience and comes to the conclusion that he's known only 39 days of pleasure in his 31 years.

Slowly, painful hurdle after hurdle, with its funny moments and its bitter ones, Jacques makes his peace with the life that he is leaving. An immense calm permeates the ending of the film: gaunt, thin and ashen, Jacques has begun the final journey. Alone in his nearly empty apartment, he waters his collection of plants, each one carefully named and representing significant moments of his life — a jade is November. The film does not so much come to an end as, with a mounting intensity of visual awareness, it seems just to hold its breath.

"In fact it wasn't death that mattered to him, but rather life," goes the passage from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel that Jacques has read to him twice, and fully describes the spirit of *Jacques et Novembre*.

For after seven years since the project got underway, after having experienced every conceivable difficulty known to filmmakers, after having been spurned and rejected by Quebec film-funding juries, *Jacques et Novembre* is a profound, life-asserting affirmation of artistic and cinematic integrity.

Simply put, *Jacques et Novembre* is a triumph.

**Michael Dorland ●**

**JACQUES ET NOVEMBRE** d. Jean Beaudry & François Bouvier **a.d.** Marquise Lepage, Marcel Simard **sc.** Beaudry, Bouvier with Claude Laroche, Marcel Simard **p.** Bouvier & Marcel Simard **art d.** Bouvier **cam.** Serge Giguère, Claude De Maisonneuve **sd.** Marcel Fraser, Diane Carrière, Dominique Chartrand, Christine Lemoine, Michel Charron, Gilbert Lachapelle, Andre Dussault, François Reid **ed.** Beaudry **mus.** Michel Rivard **p.c.** Les Productions du Lundi Matin, with the financial participation of the crew, Telefilm Canada, the Canada Council and the National Film Board of Canada. **dist. (Canada)** Cinema Libre (514) 526-0473 **foreign:** Films Transit (514) 527-9781 **colour** 16mm and video **running time** 72 mins. **l.p.** Jean Beaudry, Carole Frechette, Marie Cantin, Pierre Rousseau, Reine France, Jean Mathieu.

● Jacques (Jean Beaudry): ledger of a life

